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ABSTRACT

A frequent concern of language arts teachers is how to provide a quality differentiated program for the highly able readers in their classrooms. In order to implement such a program, one must look first at the uniqueness of the individual school and then explore a variety of organizational patterns that meet the needs of the students. One organizational pattern is intraclassroom structuring, which involves independent study, tutoring, cluster grouping, and cooperative team teaching by media specialists, resource teachers, and regular classroom teachers. A suggested approach for the development of an instructional plan for middle schools is based on an acronym, CREATE. In implementing an instructional plan, the teacher begins with an understanding of the language arts curriculum (C). The teacher then selects a specific reading skill (R) based on preassessment of student strengths and weaknesses. This is followed by an enlivening (E) of the subject material for stimulation of productive thought. Activities (A) are then selected to develop concepts in specified skill areas. The ensuing step is the teach and reteach (T) segment, during which the teacher checks skill development and adjusts the activities accordingly. During the final step, the teacher elaborates and extends (E) the skill beyond the minimum grade level requirements. Evaluation of instruction and student progress is conducted at this point. With this plan the role of the teacher is that of a resource for learning, rather than a dispenser of information. (HOD)

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Structuring a Differentiated Language Arts Program for the Highly Able Reader in the Middle School

by

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A frequent concern voiced by teachers of Language Arts is how to provide a quality differentiated program for the highly able readers in their classrooms. The basis of this skepticism is derived from the following restrictions:

1) The prevalence of heterogeneous grouping in the Middle School.
2) Mandated competency-based programs.
3) Student attitudes toward reading and their perceptions of reading.
4) The stage of the psychological and physical development of the students at this level.
5) The difficulty of providing a classroom management plan that meets the varied learning styles of Middle School students.

How can the classroom teacher structure a differentiated Language Arts program given the above mentioned restrictions?

Definition of Terms

The Maryland State Department of Education (1979) stated that: "there is a close relationship between the characteristics of gifted and talented students and those of the highly able readers .... All highly able readers may exhibit characteristics in four categories of giftedness: intellectual ability; academic aptitude; creative or productive thinking; and aesthetic awareness"(p. 14).

Paul A. Witty (1971) identified the following as characteristics of highly able readers: verbal proficiency; questioning attitude; critical thinking power; long attention span; early reading attainment; wide range of interests; and independence in work and study (p. 49).

The Language Arts program, with its diversity of subject material, encompasses a broad range of skills and interests. It presents a wide spectrum through which a teacher can incorporate lessons to meet the needs of the highly able reader. Differentiation is a method of instruction utilized by a teacher to structure the learning environment for the maximum development of individual communication skills. Differentiation increases the opportunities for students to:

1) expand their awareness and appreciation of literature
2) stimulate their creative and critical thinking skills
3) enhance their self-concept
4) develop individual learning potential

The primary purposes for the development of a differentiated program for the highly able reader, according to the Maryland State Department of Education (1979) are:

1) To obtain proficiency in the state adopted goals - usage of a variety of reading materials, selection of reading as a personal activity, usage of a word recognition system, comprehension of various reading materials, and ability to meet the reading demands for functioning in society.
2) Utilization of print and non-print materials.
3) Development of critical and creative thinking skills, and the application of these skills to comprehending various content materials.
4) To provide for experiences in individual and group activities. (pp. 10, 11)

The Hows and Whys of Implementation

In order to implement a quality differentiated program for the highly able reader, one must look first at the uniquenesses of the individual school, and then, explore a variety of organizational patterns; identifying the plan or plans which meet the needs of the students. There are a variety of ways to organize a differentiated Language Arts program for the highly able reader. Kaplan (1974) distinguished the organizational types as intra-classroom and extra-classroom. Intra-classroom structuring involves independent study, tutoring, cluster grouping, and cooperative teaming by media specialists, resource teachers, and regular classroom teachers. Extra-classroom structuring mainly focuses on the utilization of community resources, in respect to complimenting and expanding the Language Arts curriculum. The intra-classroom method, we feel, is most applicable to the Middle School because of these advantages:

1) Minimization of student scheduling conflicts.
2) Opportunities for socialization among students from various socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, and academic abilities.
3) Allows for greater flexibility in teaching methodologies.
4) Requires less personnel for implementation.
5) Monitoring of the instruction becomes more manageable due to the stationary placement of students in the regular classroom, as opposed to the pullout of some students for special intruction.

6) Promotes the development of skills in classroom management and instructional planning.

Lesson Plan Model

A suggested approach for the development of an instructional plan is based on the acronym, CREATE. In preparing an instructional plan, the teacher begins with:

C - an understanding of the Language Arts curriculum, which contains the State and/or County guidelines for minimum grade level competencies. Then, the teacher selects a

R - a specific reading skill, based on the pre-assessment of student strengths and weaknesses in the regular classroom. The following step involves

E - an enlivening of the subject material for stimulation of productive thought. The teacher, at this stage, seeks to motivate the interest and curiosity of the students in learning. Then,

A - Activities are selected to develop concepts in specified skill areas. The instruction builds from known skills and develops those potential skills identified through diagnosis.

T - This ensuing step is the teach and re-teach segment. The teacher checks skill development at this time and adjusts the activities accordingly, providing for individual student needs.

E - Finally, the teacher elaborates and extends the skill beyond the minimum grade level requirements, employing Bloom's Taxonomy. The evaluation of instruction and student progress is conducted at this point.

The strategy of the CREATE outline focuses on the selection of content based on the pre-assessment of student needs, the utilization of various methods of presentation, and the selection and/or modification of the classroom setting. In this plan, the role of the teacher is that of a resource for learning, rather than a dispenser of information. The teacher, as stated by Witty (1971), should encourage and reward exploration, invention, initiative, inquisitiveness, and originality. Henson (1978) commented on the restructuring of the lesson plan favoring inclusion of alternative learning strategies, and incorporation of problem-solving and critical thinking activities. Kirk (1972) suggested that the content of the curriculum include activities of brainstorming, problem-solving, classifying, categorizing, research projects, creative thinking, and self-initiated learning.

The following is a lesson plan, based on the CREATE outline, used with the sixth grade class at General Smallwood Middle School in Charles County, Maryland.

C - The objective chosen from the Reading curriculum guide (1980) of Charles County was, "Students will indicate differences and similarities found in various types of literature" (p. 32).

R - The specific reading skills selected were:

1) Students will identify parts of a book.

2) After review, students will summarize various literary forms and writing styles of authors.

3) Students will compare and contrast styles of character development.

E - The motivation for this lesson began with a classroom game, based on the format of "What's My Line?," using the parts of a book as the so-called characters.

A - The activities of the lesson were:

1) A review of the components of a book.

2) A discussion of favorite stories told to the students during their childhood.

3) A review of the various literary forms and writing styles of authors (fairy tales, folk tales, etc.).

4) A comparison, orally and in written form, of some of the characters in folk and fairy tales, using adjectives to describe character traits.

5) The development of a paragraph about a favorite character in literature.

T - The teach and re-teach segment involved reviewing sentence components, punctuation and grammar, - in particular, adjectives, and paragraph structure.

E - The extension of the skill involved the highly able readers answering these questions:

1) How could we tell those fairy tales and other stories differently, updating their message using today's society as the setting of the tale?
2) What would have happened if "Little Red Riding Hood" lived today?
3) How can we compare the characters of the "Three Little Pigs" to people today?

The highly able readers were instructed to develop a tale, adapted from any of the literary forms discussed, in a creative written format that would be shared orally with the class.

The evaluation of this lesson was based on student participation, class presentation of tale. written work, and the mastery of skills designated on the Charles County Language Arts Skills Checklist.

This lesson should be adapted to the skill levels of the students. It could be used as an individual plan, evolving into a unit plan for the study of literature.

Evaluation

Evaluation is an essential and continuous element in instructional planning. Renzulli (1975) stated that: "the general purpose of evaluation

is to gather, analyze, and disseminate information that can be used to make decisions about educational programs. Evaluation should always be directed toward action that hopefully will result in the improvement of services to students through the continuation, modification, or elimination of conditions which effect learning"(p. 2).

Types of evaluation instruments that would be appropriate in the assessment of the differentiation plan are curriculum checklists, interest and attitude surveys, teacher observations, student-teacher conferences, teacher-made tests (oral and/or written), criterion reference tests, and parent-teacher conferences.

Conclusion

The structuring of a differentiated program for the highly able reader involves the consideration of numerous variables; students, teachers, facilities, resources, and organizational plans. We feel the intra-classroom CREATE approach addresses some of the concerns of teachers at the Middle School level. Through the usage of this plan, students are provided with the opportunities to enhance their self-concept, develop individual skill potential, increase their awareness and appreciation of literature, and advance their critical and creative thinking abilities. The plan provides for the teacher a model for instruction to meet the varied needs of the students in the regular classroom. Therefore, in dealing with the emerging adolescent in the Middle School, it is important that teachers employ a multiplicity of techniques to meet the individual needs of students in the

regular classroom. This plan is one suggested course in structuring a differentiated Language Arts program for the highly able reader in the Middle School.

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